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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, October 10, 1935

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "HOME FIRE PLACES." Information from Dr. David J. Price, Bureau of Chemistry and Soils, U.S.D.A.

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A kerosene lantern kicked over by a cow started the great Chicago fire of 1871. You've probably heard the story. Mrs. O'Leary went out one evening to milk by the light of a lantern. (Families had their own cows in Chicago in those days, and hay-filled barns, too.) Well, on this particular evening, Mrs. O'Leary's cow happened to be frisky. It kicked over the lamp and set the barn on fire. A wind carried the sparks. And before long, the whole city was ablaze.

I'm repeating that story because this week is the anniversary of that famous fire. We call it Fire Prevention Week. And it is a yearly reminder and opportunity for us all to check up on what we know about preventing fires, both for our own safety and for our neighbors'.

Of course, we women are concerned with fire prevention these days -- especially housewives at home. The figures show a startling increase in home fires since 1924. And along with it an increase in deaths from fire of small children around the home.

What are the places around your house most likely to give fire trouble? The insurance companies have studied that matter. So have the fire-prevention workers at the Department of Agriculture. They give a list of about 7 chief causes of home fires: 1, defective chimneys and flues; 2, combustible roofs which may burn if a spark drops on them; 3, gasoline, kerosene, and similar combustible materials; 4, matches and smoking; 5, stoves, furnaces and heating apparatus; 6, hot ashes and coals, including open fires; 7, electricity and electrical appliances. Add lightning to this list when farm home fires are up for consideration.

The way your house is built, and then the way you use it decide whether it is likely to suffer from fire. Some people understand the causes of fires and are careless about them just the same. Then, other people often don't realize when they are running fire risks.

For example, some people build the furnace and stove fires in the fall even though they know the chimney has needed repairing for a long time or the flue is clogged with cobwebs, soot or dust. Other people just don't realize what a fire hazard a defective chimney or flue can be. Well, here's the time of year to clean and repair all chimneys and pipes in your house. Here's the time to cement loose bricks and cracks to prevent sparks from getting out on the roof.

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We don't have to go along in ignorance of fire hazards anymore, fortunately. So much study has been done on fire-resistant construction of homes, that anyone can learn how to put up a safe chimney, how to protect his house against lightning, what kind of materials to use for his roof, how to handle gasoline and kerosene safely and so on. You can write to the Department of Agriculture at Washington, D. C., for information on any of these matters.

Here's what the fire prevention men there say about chimneys and flues, for example. They say: "Build chimneys from the ground up, or rest them on foundation walls of masonry. Build them of brick or stone. Avoid long smoke pipes. And never allow a smoke pipe to pass through floors, closets or concealed locations. Clean chimneys, flues, and smoke-pipes at least once a year."

As for safe roofs, here's more common-sense advice. "Use good fire-resistant roofing material. Ask your builder or dealer. If you use wooden shingles, use the best grade of edge-grain shingles and insist on good workmanship in laying them."

What about gasoline and kerosene? Here is a subject that concerns housewives especially. People have been dying year after year from cleaning clothes at home with gasoline. And the newspapers have reported it year after year. Still, a lot of us pennywise women go right on trying to save a dollar on the cleaning bill and risking our necks and our homes whenever we do it. The safe cleaning fluid to use at home is carbon tetrachloride. Gasoline, naptha, and so on are too dangerous even in careful hands.

As for kerosene or "coal oil", well, 50 years ago kerosene lamps and lanterns were some of the biggest causes of farm fires. Everybody knew how dangerous kerosene was. But still today plenty of people use kerosene to start a furnace or stove fire, or worse, to revive a fire.

Say the experts: "Never use gasoline or kerosene to start or revive a fire. Never use gasoline, benzine, naptha, or other flammable liquids for cleaning at home. Never fill lamps, lanterns, stoves or heaters while they are burning. Never store gasoline or kerosene in open containers in any building. If you must keep some of this material around, keep it only in small quantities--under a gallon--in sealed containers or safety cans."

Matches and smoking still remain one of the chief causes of home fires. The experts advise using only safety matches around the house, keeping matches out of the reach of children, not smoking near combustible materials. Personally, I'd add, being extra careful with cigarettes if you're forgetful or absent-minded. You've heard the stories of the burning stub that slips off the ash-tray onto the overstuffed chair, or falls in the waste-basket, or drops among the blankets of the man who smokes in bed and falls asleep.

When the home fires from kerosene lamps stopped burning, the fires from defective electric wiring and careless use of electric appliances began. The fire insurance companies say that the amateur electrician is a constant menace to himself, his family and his neighbors. They also say that electricity can be the safest mechanical servant or the most dangerous, depending on how we use it.

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The experts advise: "See that all electrical wiring in your house meets the requirements of the National Electrical Code. Be careful not to overload circuits. Use fuses of the correct amperage, so that the safe current-carrying capacity of the wire will not be exceeded. Disconnect flatirons, curling irons, and heating pads whenever you leave them."

That's only a start -- just a small reminder of ways to keep your home free from "fire places." But as I said, you're welcome to write to the Department of Agriculture for free printed information on the subject. The Boy Scout or Girl Scout in your family will be interested, too. So will 4-H Club members.

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